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Rachel Shelden

Interview

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Interview with Rachel Shelden, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is proud to speak with Rachel Shelden, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma, and discuss her recent book *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War*. Thank you for joining us today.

Rachel Shelden (RS): Thanks so much for having me.

CWBR: For starters, I'd like to know what first brought you to the topic?

RS: Well it's a great question. I started this project as my dissertation at the University of Virginia, and I had been interested in Washington politics for quite some time. I had worked for the Library Congress before going to graduate school, and I was very interested in the way that people interacted in Washington, and the difference in the culture of Washington from the inside and Washington from the outside (having not grown up in Washington, I'm originally from Chicago). So, that was something that really struck me while I was living there, and I was working on a history of the House of Representatives, and I noticed that this was something that was very big in the nineteenth century, this sort of culture of Washington, and this was something that I wanted to pursue long-term. So although I actually came to the topic a little bit later in graduate school, it was something that was bubbling in my mind for a long time.

CWBR: You say that this was a problem that was very big in the nineteenth century--I'm sure some people would say that it's a problem that hasn't gone away--so what were some of the challenges then, of exposing the nature of that disconnect, and sort of the true culture of Washington when you're talking about people who have a very vested interest in projecting a certain kind of image and a certain kind of rhetoric and representation, when perhaps there's something else beneath the surface.

RS: I think that's something we've struggled with for a very long time. As historians, we have a lot of faith in the documents that we work with, and we worked with the Congressional Globe, which is the official record of the U.S. Congress in the nineteenth century--for most of the nineteenth century. We had great faith in the Congressional Globe to be able to tell us what was going on in Washington and the ways that politicians engaged in thinking about the major political issues of the period. And there were no real indicators as to why the Congressional Globe wouldn't have given us a straightforward answer to the ways that people thought and the way they behaved. But I discovered more and more as I was reading about the politicians and reading their letters and readingâ€”particularly their letters back home to their familiesâ€”that they didn't have much trust in the Congressional Globe to tell them what was really going on because they didn't pay much attention to the speeches in Washington. So the more that I sort of peeled back the layers of the Congressional Globe, the more I could tell that it wasn't actually representative of what politicians thought in terms of getting policy forward in the process of politicking in the nineteenth century. So, I think it's a challenge because, as we all know, as all historians deal with, our sources can only take us so far. They are only a small portion of what exists out there in terms of what was actually going on. I had to dig deep to find references, usually not long stories, to the kind of politicking that happened outside the halls of the capital, at places like boarding houses and dinners and parties, and meetings of various associations in Washington. That was a challenge, but I could tell that something was really not quite right there.

CWBR: So, really then, most of the political discussions that mattered the most in reality, you would say, were the ones that took place outside of the halls of Congress?

RS: That mattered to policy making. I would never say that the Congressional Globe was non-important in terms of understanding what was

going in the rest of the country, because in a lot of ways, the Congressional Globe was very much representative of what constituents wanted to hear. That's who these people were talking to when they were speaking in the halls of Congress. They wanted their constituents back in Massachusetts and South Carolina and Kentucky and Louisiana to actually hear what they wanted to hear. It was not, however, representative of what was going on in terms of the actual politicking in Washington.

CWBR: One thing that interests me about that point is this very conscious importance of rhetoric. Especially as we approach the Civil War and rhetoric, especially secessionist rhetoric, becomes even more virulent, even more fiery, it's interesting then that perhaps a lot of those speakers didn't fully believe what they were saying, or is that an overstatement?

RS: I think it's a little bit of an overstatement. This all goes back, as many of these things do, to David Potter, and David Potter's famed article "The Historian's Use of Nationalism and Vice-Versa," where he talks about these conflicting loyalties that a person might have. Loyalty to state, loyalty to family, loyalty to nation, and I think it was possible for a lot of these men to say things about their views on slavery in particular, but also be friendly with people who disagreed with them. In part because of the personal experience of living in Washington. It was very hard, if you wanted to have any kind of political role in the city at this time, to avoid interacting with people who are going to have different opinions from you, and that was an acknowledged part of being there. So you see, for example, slaveholders talking about how most Northerners are antislavery, and not liking those views, but being willing to work with it because they have this understanding that they have those views and those are the views of their constituents. So I would never say, for example, that they don't really believe what they're saying. They may say it a little bit more strongly, or in particularly fiery rhetoric to try to get their constituents fired up about the issue, but I would say that much of what happened was really in the context of "We are politicians, that's what we do, and we all have a sense of what we want," which was to keep the Union together--most of the people wanted to keep the Union together--and to have a successful Federal government. It didn't always work, but there was certainly a level of respect that existed among the politicians that didn't necessarily extend to the constituents.

CWBR: That issue of respect sort of leads to another question, because it seems like the centerpiece of most narratives of Washington politics right before

the Civil War was, of course, Preston Brooks caning Charles Sumner. It's sort of the image that's been seared into every textbook. And, a lot of scholars have established the importance of honor and personal politics. But it seems like part of what you're saying is that this respect and sense of honor, in more cases, helped keep these people together and working together, rather than driving wedges between them. So would you call instances of people like Preston Brooks more of the exception than the rule?

RS: I wouldn't say that it was an exception in the sense that there was an incredible amount of violence in the nineteenth century, and especially in Washington, which was a pretty violent but also just a pretty dirty and disgusting city, which allowed for that kind of thing to happen. This is part of what I tried to show in that chapter in particular and in my book, that if you understand the caning of Charles Sumner in the context of the violence that existed in Washington, it's not unusual. What made it unusual is that it got the kind of press that it did, and it became such an incredible tool for people in the North and the South, in thinking about the problems of, say, a slave power, or of an oppressive North. So, it's usual in the sense that there was quite a bit of violence. It's unusual in the terms of political tools outside of Washington, but the people in Washington understood it as an example of violence, of things getting out of hand, and one that didn't necessarily mean that we were about to crumble into Civil War.

CWBR: For the politicians that may have witnessed this, or heard about it, it was sort of disconnected from what the nation saw. In a sense, the nation saw this as a much more important event than perhaps the people there at the scene did?

RS: Exactly, it was a big event when it happened, and people were upset, but it went away after a couple days. People sort of said, "Ok, now we're going to get back to the business of making policy, and that involves talking to my Southern neighbors or my Northern neighbors, and I can't avoid that, nor should I." So it certainly was something that really energized people who weren't in Washington, but in Washington, it wasn't such a big deal.

CWBR: One that you've mentioned several times that also sticks out to me is this sense of place, and you mentioned that because of the nature of Washington, that these people couldn't really avoid each other, even if they had wanted to. I was hoping you could talk about the role of proximity, and how that affected politics, and also what were some of the places that politicians interacted outside

of Congress?

RS: I'm happy to. I think one of the most fascinating aspects of Washington in this period is that there are sort of two Washingtons. There's the permanent Washington. There's the Washington that has the people that you would see in any city--in New York, in Charleston, etc.--where you're going to have workers, women, African Americans. That absolutely existed in Washington, but there was also this more temporary part of Washington that really only existed between the Capital building and the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue, which is not a very large area. In that area, you had mostly male politicians living in boarding houses, also some hotels. They spent almost all of their time together. They were either in the Capital or they were at home, or they were at dinners or gambling houses--maybe some brothels also--in that area. So they actually spent most of their time together, and what this produced was something of a fraternity. You might think about it as a giant male bonding session, where you have these men who spend all their time together, not so much with women, and where they're really engaging in conversation in places outside the Capital. That includes things like dinners. Lots of people held dinners for their friends. This would happen, some, with the permanent politicians. William Corcoran, who was a famous socialite in the period, would host regular political dinners, and he lived right by the White House so you would see, basically, a revolving door of politicians coming to eat with him, but also just people sitting down to have dinner at the end of the day. There were various boarding houses. You also had people going to church together. You had people meeting at Masonic groups, and also other smaller groups that they put together. One really famous example of this was Abraham Lincoln, who was in a group called the Young Indian Club, which was sort of a political debating group that consisted of himself, one other Northerner, and five Southerners including future Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, which made for some really interesting commentary on Lincoln's behalf. But the two of them became quite friendly in this group and talked politics and this had a real influence, I believe, on Lincoln's thinking on politics in Washington, and particularly the secession crisis. Thinking about what was possible, the kinds of compromises that could happen, and the way in which you could have a conversation with someone from the South, and not have it lead to Civil War. So there was a lot discussion that happened outside of the Capital building in these more informal circumstances, but with the same group of people.

CWBR: Would you say that Lincoln's experience in Washington was initially what made him optimistic that war could be avoided?

RS: I do think so. I think he was affected by his time in Washington in a variety of ways, and I point this out in a couple of places in the book. One of things that was really important to him in terms of his experience in Washington and being in this Young Indian Club was to expose him to John Crittenden, who was very famous politician from Kentucky, someone that he admired very much. Crittenden was life-long politician, had spent many years in Washington, and Crittenden himself became quite friendly with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's main rival in Illinois in the 1858 Senate campaign, and Douglas is very happy to get Crittenden's endorsement in 1858, and this had a very big impact on Lincoln's experiences in thinking about who should be in his cabinet once he's elected in 1860. I believe he never forgave John Crittenden for his behavior in supporting Stephen Douglas. But it also gave him a sense of this Washington club, and what was possible in Washington. I think he really underestimated how much secession was going to be a grassroots movement that did not have any kind of real push in Washington. It was much more a rejection of Washington politicians, and so he misread the South. He had a misunderstanding of what was actually going to happen when he made his original decision to not speak out, to not say anything, to not support the attempts in Congress to try to come up with a solution--the Crittenden Compromise--again, his anger at Crittenden is something that I think we really underestimate. In spite of that, Lincoln was smart man, he figured things out, and a lot of historians have shown his thinking in March and April to be quite different, but early on in the process, I think he had a great misunderstanding of what was going to happen.

CWBR: Do you think that this club should be viewed more in the light of having been able, for a long time and with some notable instances of compromise, that they were able for so long to smooth over differences and prevent war from breaking out, or is this more a story of these guys in this "Washington bubble" disconnected from what the issues of the war and secession were going to be, really ultimately being unable to prevent something that they didn't really understand?

RS: That's an excellent question. I think what I've tried to do and the historians who read this will recognize this, is sort of turn the old revisionist theory on its head. So the old revisionist theory being that a blundering generation of politicians pushed toward war because they had a

misunderstanding of how serious these things were, and they were particularly fiery, and they ended up pushing us into war; it's their fault. My point here is to show, to a large degree, that they didn't really have control. They were not the ones that could have made decisions about this, and they did live in a bubble that made them really unable to understand a lot of what was going on at home. Jefferson Davis being the best example of this. He's quite sad when secession comes, and he's sad, in part I think because he didn't realize how serious it was. I large part because he was so sad that the Union was falling apart, but also because he didn't understand how this could happen so quickly; he was very surprised by it. I would say that my point is much more that they didn't have the tools to fix this problem. The movement toward secession was really a rejection of *them*, and a rejection of their way of handling politics. You read the letters during the secession crisis, and so much of what they say is "these corrupt officials in Washington, they've failed us, over and over and over again, so we need to take matters into our own hands." So I think the secession crisis is much more about that, it's not so much about the blundering politicians. Of course they contribute, because they make all these fiery speeches, but they didn't really have it in their power to fix the situation.

CWBR: Professor Shelden, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work, *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War*.

RS: Thank you so much, I enjoyed talking with you.